

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ADP-00 /026 W

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FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2845

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY PARIS

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CINCPAC

COMUSSAG

S E C R E T PHNOM PENH 9293

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PFOR, CB

SUBJECT: POLITICAL AMBITIONS OF MAJ GEN SOSHTENE FERNANDEZ

1. OVER THE PAST YEAR I HAVE DEVELOPED WITH MAJGEN SOSHTENE FERNANDEZ, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF FANK, WHAT I BELIEVE IS A RELATIONSHIP OF CONSIDERABLE CANDOR. DURING MY FAREWELL CALL ON HIM TODAY WE REVIEWED THE INTERNAL POLITICAL SITUATION FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR, AND I DETECTED IN HIM, MORE THAN EVER BEFORE, WHAT I WOULD DESCRIBE AS NASCENT POLITICAL AMBITIONS.

2. SOSTHENE EXPRESSED DURING OUR CONVERSATION THE FOLLOWING OPINIONS ON POLITICIANS AND THE CURRENT SITUATION.

A. HE CONFIRMED HIS OFTEN REPORTED AND DEEP PERSONAL ANTAGONISM FOR PRIME MINISTER IN TAM, WHOSE GOVERNMENT HE BELIEVED CANNOT ENDURE MUCH LONGER AND TO WHOM HE ASCRIBED VARIOUS ANTI-FANK ACTIVITIES SUCH AS THE DIVERSION OF RECRUITS TO HIS OWN SECURITY FORCE, AND A FAILURE TO MOVE ACTIVELY ON IMPLEMENTING NATIONAL CONSCRIPTION. AS IN THE PAST, I STRESSED TO SOSTHENE OUR VIEW THAT JUST AS HE IS INDISPENSABLE ON THE MILITARY FRONT SO AT
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THE MOMENT IS IN TAM ON THE POLITICAL FRONT SINCE WHETHER DESERVEDLY OR NOT IN TAM ENJOYS A GOOD AND HONEST REPUTATION WITH ELEMENTS OF THE POPULATION WHO OTHERWISE HAVE NO USE FOR THE PRESENT REGIME.

B. SOSTHENE STATED THAT IN HIS JUDGMENT THE DEPARTURE OF LON NOL AT THIS TIME WOULD LEAD TO A STORMY INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE BUT THAT THE STORM WOULD PASS IN TIME, JUST AS IT HAD WHEN SIHANOUK HAD BEEN DEPOSED, AND A SUCCESSOR GOVERNMENT WOULD BE ESTABLISHED. HE GAVE ME THE IMPRESSION THAT AT THE RIGHT TIME HE WOULD ON BALANCE FAVOR THE DEPARTURE OF LON NOL AND HIS CLOSEST ASSOCIATES.

C. WITH RESPECT TO THE SUCCESSION TO THE MARSHAL, SOSTHENE HAD LITTLE TO SAY IN FAVOR OF ANY CONTEMPORARY LEADERS. HE FLATLY STATED THAT SIRIK MATAK, ALTHOUGH AN EXCELLENT ADMINISTRATOR, HAS A NARROW POLITICAL BASE, WITH THE REPUBLICAN PARTY REPRESENTING NOTHING BUT A FEW AGING POLITICAL LEADERS AND THE STUDENTS STILL VIOLENTLY OPPOSED TO HIM. HE NOTED THAT SON NGOC THANH, BECAUSE OF HIS CONTACTS WITH THE KHMER KROM, RETAINS A CERTAIN POLITICAL FORCE, BUT HE FELT THAT THANH, TOO, IS A FIGURE OF THE PAST. HE DESCRIBED THE DEMOCRAT LEADERS (CHAU SAU AND HUY KANTHOUL) AS INADEQUATE POLITICIANS. HE ALSO SAW NONE OF THE SOCIO-REPUBLICANS AS REPRESENTING A VIABLE SUCCESSION.

D. AT THIS POINT, I ASKED HIM FRANKLY WHETHER HE HIMSELF HAS POLITICAL AMBITIONS. HE REPLIED THAT HE HAD IN FACT CONSIDERED WHETHER THE FANK AND ITS LEADERSHIP MIGHT MOVE, AS THE INTERNAL SITUATION EVOLVES, INTO POLITICS BUT THAT HE HAD REACHED NO FIRM CONCLUSION. I ASKED HIM WHETHER IN FACT THE FANK WAS SUFFICIENTLY FREE OF DIVISIONS TO ACT AS A POLITICAL UNIT, NOTING THAT THE FANK HAD ALWAYS SEEMED TO ME DIVIDED POLITICALLY. SOSTHENE REPLIED THAT ALTHOUGH THERE ARE DIVISIONS AMONG THE YOUNGER OFFICERS HE CONSIDERS THE RANKS OF THE MORE SENIOR OFFICERS RELATIVELY SOLID WITH THE EXCEPTION OF FORMER PROVINCIAL POLICE OFFICERS WHO WERE CO-OPTED INTO THE ARMED FORCES IN 1970 AND INCLUDE SOME IN TAM SUPPORTERS. IN CONNECTION WITH THE ROLE WHICH THE MILITARY MIGHT PLAY IN CAMBODIA, SOSTHENE REFERRED IN PASSING TO THE SITUATION IN BOTH THAILAND AND INDONESIA AND SPOKE APPROVINGLY IN PARTICULAR OF THANOM.

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3. TOWARD THE END OF OUR MEETING, I BROUGHT THE CONVERSATION AROUND TO THE PRESENT SITUATION AND ITS LIKELY EVOLUTION OVER THE NEXT WEEKS AND MONTHS. I TOLD SOSTHENE THAT, AS HE KNEW, A DISPLAY OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN THE REPUBLIC, GIVEN THE STILL PRESSING MILITARY SITUATION, WOULD DEROGATE FROM THE REPUBLIC'S REPUTATION ABROAD AND CREATE PARTICULAR DIFFICULTIES FOR GOVERNMENTS SUPPORTING THE REPUBLIC, AND ESPECIALLY THE UNITED STATES. I CAUTIONED HIM AGAINST ANY RASH ACTION AGAINST IN TAM OR OTHERS AND EMPHASIZED OUR CONTINUING READINESS TO CONSULT WITH HIM AS THE POLITICAL SITUATION EVOLVES. I STATED OUR CONVICTION THAT THAT THE HIGH POLITICAL COUNCIL IS A USEFUL SYMBOL AND SHOULD PROBABLY CONTINUE IN BEING AFTER ITS INITIAL MANDATE EXPIRES IN

OCTOBER. I ALSO REPEATD MY EARLIER STATEMENT THAT WE BELIEVE IN TAM CONTINUES TO HAVE A GREAT DEAL TO OFFER AT THIS TIME, ALTHOUGH ONE CAN EQUALLY FORESEE A SITUATION IN WHICH HE WOULD WISH TO RESIGN AND A NEW GOVERNMENT WOULD BE FORMED. SOSTHENE REACTED AFFIRMATIVELY TO THESE SUGGESTIONS. HE SAID THAT HE AGREED THAT POLITICKING SHOULD BE AVOIDED FOR THE TIME BEING, AND HE PROMISED TO REMAIN IN CLOSE CONSULTATION WITH THE MISSION. HE SAID, HOWEVER, THAT HE ENVISAGED A POINT LATER ON WHEN IT WOULD IN FACT BE NECESSARY TO MAKE CHANGES, AND AT THAT POINT HE WOULD WANT TO BE IN VERY CLOSE TOUCH WITH US.

4. COMMENT. IN THIS CONVERSATION SOSTHENE IN EFFECT IDENTIFIED THE ARMED FORCES AS NOT ONLY A MEDIATING FORCE BETWEEN CIVILIAN POLITICIANS BUT AS A REPLACEMENT FOR THEM. IT HAS BEEN OUR OWN ASSESSMENT, AT LEAST UP TO THE PRESENT TIME, THAT THE ARMED FORCES ARE THEMSELVES NOT SUFFICIENTLY UNIFIED OR ORGANIZATIONALLY STRONG TO ASSUME POLITICAL AS WELL AS MILITARY FUNCTIONS. THAT ASSESSMENT IS PROBABLY STILL CORRECT, BUT IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY EFFECTIVE CIVILIAN SUCCESSION TO LON NOL AND HIS COTERIE IT NOW SEEMS OBVIOUS THAT SOME FANK OFFICERS, AND NOTABLY SOSTHENE, ENVISAGE THE FANK AS PLAYING A MORE DIRECT POLITICAL ROLE THAN EVER BEFORE. IF HOSTILITIES ARE PROLONGED AND IF A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT CONTINUES TO BE ELUSIVE, A MILITARY TAKEOVER OF THE REPUBLIC BY OFFICERS WHOSE DESTINIES ARE INTIMATELY ASSOCIATED WITH ITS SURVIVAL COULD BE AN INCREASING POSSIBILITY.

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